Why Hasn't Leonard Merrick Been More Popular?

It's a Real Literary Puzzle, and Leading Authors Discuss It

LEONARD MERRICK has long been dear to the hearts of the reviewers, just as he has long been called, par excellence, the novelists' novelist. So far so good. But how account for the fact that until very recently the great reading public has apparently failed to catch the gleam of gold and has turned a deaf ear to a writer who, according to no less an authority than Mr. Howells, outdoes the French and equals the Russians in realism?

Merrick

How account for it? One bumps squarely up against a literary puzzle—a puzzle which has really puzzled, and to the solution of which many keenly critical minds have bent their talents. A recent writer in "The New Republic" addresses himself to the problem. Mr. Merrick's publishers, E. P. Dutton & Co., are getting out an edition of his works with introductions from such well known English authors as Pinero, Barrie, Wells, Chesterton, W. J. Locke, Maurice Hewlett and others—and one by our own American novelist and essayist, William Dean Howells. Here, says the reviewer in "The New Republic," we have the spectacle of "a group of famous contemporaries banded together to see a man through. And it is even more interesting to find one question that seems—either openly said or lurking in their minds—to trouble them all. Why is it that Mr. Leonard Merrick is not more popular? Why is a novelist so perfect in his art, why is a writer of works that possess such a 'singular shapeliness,' to use Mr. Howells's phrase, not more widely read? As Barrie says, 'They have an uneasy feeling that if the public will not like his works, will not take his works to their hearts, there must be something wrong with the popularity of their own.

"Please Don't Like Me!"

"'Unless you like Merrick also, please don't like me.' It is only natural for these authors to wonder why a man who has carried to perfection the technique of the art should not win what they have won. In the same way we have heard painters wonder why Fragonard was not more followed after.

"But whatever the reason may be for Mr. Merrick's comparative lack of following, I should object to the implication lurking behind a good many of these comments. One gets the impression that Mr. Merrick is not popular because, as one of his critics says, 'the artistry is so faultless, and because he makes no concessions to the taste of the public groundlings.' Obviously, to resort to mawkish sentiment and to tricks might catch for a novelist a certain popular taste. But that does not prove that the absence of these faults keeps a work unpopular.

"The truth is that for laymen form in any art is only a means that conveys to them the content. They have no conscious sense or enjoyment of form in itself. As a matter of fact, form is a kind of separate dialect that belongs to each individual art. And people may be cultivated to enjoy form in itself; there is no doubt of that. They may be taught to see that every art has its conditions, the rules of the game, as a sport in athletics has. But Mr. Merrick is not like Flaubert in having a public that is cultivated in that particular sort of thing. Clearly, then, there may not be a large enough public capable of admiring Mr. Merrick's novels on account of their admirable form. But certainly few people could fail to like them because of it.

"It may be also that there is a certain irony in these novels that hurts their popularity; together with the fact, as Mr. Howells suggests, that the stories are almost always very unhappy, full of the meanness of things, and without the great world, titles, society and grand ladies."

Says Mr. Howells—

For an amplification of this hint we turn to Mr. Howells's introduction to "The Actor Manager." And we read:

"Of the two arch-enemies of love, prosperity and adversity, he makes the oftener study of adversity. There is a great deal of grim adversity in his books, which sometimes remains adversity to the end, but also sometimes puts off its frown. It is the more depressing when it becomes or remains the atmosphere of that ambition which seeks fruition in the successes of the theater. If we are to believe him—and somehow Mr. Merrick mostly makes you believe him—the poor creatures—mostly poor women creatures—who are trying to get upon the stage are almost without number, and certainly outnumber the struggling journalists and authors a hundred to one. The spectacle of their humility and humiliation, of their meek endeavors and their cruel defeats, is of such frequent recurrence in his novels and tales that, after a little knowledge of them, one approaches the scene with an expectation of heartache through which nothing short of the mastery dealing with them would support one.

"In the monotony of the event it is very remarkable how he distinguishes and characterizes the different children of adversity, especially the daughters. They are commonly alike in their adversity, but individual in their way of experiencing it. In fact, in an age of intensely feminized fiction, he is one of the first of those who know how to catch the likenesses, to the last fleeting expression, of women, and especially women of the theater. Probably these are not essentially different from any other women, but they have an evolution through their environment which no one else seems to have studied so well. Sometimes they are good women and sometimes they are bad, but they are so far from a temperament differently affected by their errant and public life, their starved or surfeited vanity, their craze for change or variety, and they keep a simplicity, a singleness, in their selfishness and depravity such as differentiates them from women bred amid the artificialities of the world on the other side of the footlights.

"There is no perceptible mechanism in the story of 'The Actor-Manager,' in every way the best of Mr. Merrick's stories, so far as I know them.

Alive

"At all moments of it you feel that it happened and that the people in it are alive, with a life of human probabilities beyond it. I can recall no English novel in which the study of temperament or character is carried deeper, allowing for what the people are, and I do not remember a false or mistaken line or color in it. For anything to equal it we must go to the Slavs, in such triumphs of their naturalness as Turgenev's 'Smoke,' or the society passages of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace.' The French stories are conventional in their naturalism beside it; perhaps a Spaniard like Galdos has done work of equal fineness. It is not alone in Royce Oliphant, with the stress of his hereditary conscience, or in Blanche Ellerton, depraved both by her artistry and by her ambition, that the author convinces; Otho Fairbairn, who becomes the 'scoundrel' that Blanche not less deliberately than hysterically makes him for his money, and Alma King, who is as good an artist as Blanche and yet a good woman, and Blanche's mother, whose sentimental novelettes support her contemptuous husband in the production of his real but unmerchantable masterpieces, and Blanche's plain sister, with her famine for a little love, a little admiration from men, are all in their several ways entirely lifelike.

"The theater itself, which began as a theater of art and ended as a theater of profit, has almost a human appeal in its tragedy, as if it were a sentient organism, with a heart to be broken and a soul to be lost. Nobody who is not inevitably bad is very bad; in the book the world is the world we live in.

"Why, then, is not this masterly novelist a master universally recognized and accepted? That is something that I have asked myself more than once, especially in reading the criticisms of his several books, not one of which has lacked the praise of some critic qualified to carry conviction of its merit. Perhaps the secret is that the stories are almost always unhappy. There is no consolation in their tragedy; they do not even 'raise a noble terror,' such as was once the supposed business of tragedy. Upon the whole they leave you feeling mean, feeling retroactively capable of the shabby things which have been done in them.

"Another secret may be that when the poverty which haunts them is relieved in this case or that, you are left with a sense of the vast poverty still remaining in the world; if a struggler is given a chance to get his breath the great struggle of life goes on.

"Still another secret may be that there is no fine world, no great world in the books; we scarcely recall a personage or title in any of them, and people who like to associate with the rich or great when they are 'taken out of themselves' have not the company of so much as one high-born villain, one corrupt *grande dame*.

"Socially it is not good company we find ourselves in, and morally it is not even the 'best company,' as Jane Austen calls it; and yet it is somehow consoling, somehow encouraging to have known such a good and clever man as Royce Oliphant, such a good, yet gifted, woman as Alma King, even such a kind, wrongdoing soul as Otho Fairbairn, or such a gentle, modest, unselfish creature as the mother of Blanche Ellerton, earning her husband's bread by writing the popular novelettes which enable him to write his unpopular novels and despise her trash on a full stomach.

"Very likely Mr. Merrick may have had his moment of consciously contriving the story of 'The Actor-Manager' and of actuating his characters in conformity to a preconceived plan, but he does not suffer his readers to share these humiliating moments. For all they know, the things happen from the nature of the characters in the given circumstances, with no apparent agency of his."

Says Pinero—

Then we open another of the newly edited novels—this time "The Position of Peggy Harper"—and discover a few opening pages from the always interesting pen of the playwright Arthur Pinero. And he gives us, from a fresh angle, proof of the fine veracity of these tales:

"It is, I believe, an open secret that Mr. Merrick was once upon a time 'on the stage,' and the reason I have been asked to write a short introduction to 'The Position of Peggy Harper' is, I suppose, that I also was an actor in my early days. I also have been a client of Mr. Albemarle, the theatrical agent, and have climbed, too, that stone staircase leading to Mr. Potter's waiting room described in another theatrical story by Mr. Merrick, 'When Love Flies Out o' the Window.' And whether you call Albemarle 'Potter' or Potter 'Albemarle,' no man or woman can hate him more cordially in the recollection than I do—not even Mr. Merrick.

"But on the doorstep of Albemarle's or Potter's dramatic agency Mr. Merrick and I, so far as our theatrical experiences go, seem to part company. Chance guided me into fairly smooth paths; Mr. Merrick fortunately was to tread rougher ones. I say fortunately because it is to Mr. Merrick's obviously first-hand acquaintance with the lower grade theater that we owe at least two quite remarkable studies of shady theatrical life and character—the novel to which these few words are prefixed and the before-mentioned 'When Love Flies Out o' the Window.' Though my experiences may have differed from Mr. Merrick's, I have seen enough of the seamy side of the stage to enable me to vouch for the truth of these two works.

"Short as it is, you have the very spirit of Mr. Merrick's literary gift and method—conciseness and ease. He will reveal in a seemingly careless half-sentence what another writer will take a page over or will heavily underscore. Not for Mr. Merrick is the labored analysis—analysis run mad in some cases—of many of our modern novelists, nor the loud devices of the deliberate sensationalist.

Leonard Merrick, the novelist who after much vicissitude at length finds himself taken up by the masses

Like Etching

"I have used the expression 'etched,' and this expression indicates, in my opinion, the most characteristic feature and the high-water mark of Mr. Merrick's genius. He does with his pen what a fine etcher does with his needle. Working in a far different medium, he gives us the special qualities of the etched line—its animation, its spontaneousness, its rare economy. 'Every stroke he makes tells strongly against him if it be bad,' says Seymour Haden of the etcher, 'or proves him to be a master if it be good. In no branch of art does a touch go for so much. The necessity for a rigid selection is therefore constantly present to his mind. If one stroke in the right place tells more for him than ten in the wrong, it would seem to follow that that single stroke is a more learned stroke than the scores of ten by which he would have arrived at his end.' Adapt these terms to the art of the novel writer, and Mr. Merrick emerges from the test triumphantly.

"Take as an example of his etching method—and I select it almost at haphazard—his description of the personal appearance of Armytage, the bogus manager:

"'The advertiser—who, it transpired, called himself Armytage—was evidently attired for the occasion. He wore a frockcoat, in combination with a summer waistcoat, much crumpled, and the trousers of a tweed suit. A garnet pin ornamented the wrong portion of a made-up tie.'

"Now, this is neither impressionish nor realism, in the sense in which these words are bandied about. It is a plain, straightforward, apparently effortless account of a man's apparel, his coat, waistcoat, trousers, necktie. It doesn't cry out in the voice of the impressionist: 'Look! See how clever I am, how nothing escapes me; how I observe in a flash what is hidden from the common vision!' Nor does it with the larger liberality of the realist afford us a glimpse of Mr. Armytage's soiled underwest. To carry the contrast still further, it has nothing of the snapshot, on the one hand, nor the scalpel and the dissecting table on the other. I repeat, it is the most modest of statements; but every stroke, as in the most skillful of etching, being 'in the right place,' the imagination is stimulated to evolve from it the whole history of the miserable Armytage. Struggle, defeat, poverty, the fight for life, the pitiful roguery—all is suggested as it were upon the bitten plate. *The trousers of a tweed suit!* There is the 'learned stroke.' The 'garnet pin ornamenting the wrong portion of a made-up tie,' is eloquent enough, but *the trousers of a tweed suit* in conjunction with the frockcoat—out of date and shiny at its elbows, as we are allowed to suspect—is the supreme touch."

Then Why Not Popular?

And Mr. Pinero, coming to the point of the novelist's early failure to secure a wide public, goes on to say:

"Perhaps it is the spectacle of the sombre figure of Tragedy tugging at Comedy's sleeve, and holding his sinister face close to hers so constantly recurring in Mr. Merrick's work, even in its lightest moments, that has cost this author many thousands of readers. What Forster says of Dickens, in a criticism of 'Bleak House,' may with truth be said of Mr. Merrick—that he shares with the Frenchman the gift of being serious gayly and charmingly. But the gayety of Merrick is never quite so buoyant, so wholehearted, as the gayety of Dickens; the note of reservation is always present; a shadow, if only a flicker, is seldom absent from the printed page. Which is slightly disturbing to that class of reader who, in opposition to nature, likes his sunshine unmottled.

Says Hewlett—

"Alas! In the theater of books, as well as in the theater of plays, a vast number of people are still looking for wigs, and Mr. Merrick's characters wear none, being the creatures not only of keen observation, but of a strict literary integrity. The issue of a collected edition of the works of Leonard Merrick is, therefore, a matter for special rejoicing, for with it this most accomplished and unobtrusive of narrators may be said to have come into his own."

Maurice Hewlett gives one an idea of the richness of the pages which comprise "Cynthia":

"The problem," he says, "with which 'Cynthia' opens is the familiar one of the novelist, considered as such, and as lover, husband, father and citizen. Now it's an odd thing, but not so odd as it seems at first blush, that while you may conceive a poet in these relations and succeed in interesting your readers you will fail with a novelist. There is Pendennis, of course, but who believes that Pen was a great novelist or cares what kind of novelist he was? Who cares about 'Walter Lorraine'? Would anybody give twopence to read it? The reason is that in the poet the manifestations of literary genius are direct and explicit—some are susceptible of quotation, some may be cut out with the scissors—while in the novelist they are oblique and implied. Humphrey Kent in 'Cynthia' is in no sense an explicit genius; we are not, in fact, told that he was a genius at all. His technique seems to have been that of Mr. George Moore, then rather fashionable. The book puts it no higher than this: that the hero, with an obvious bent for writing, marries in a hurry and then finds out that he cannot be an honest man and support his wife and child by the same stroke. It is not whether he can be a good novelist and a good lover, too, but whether he can be a good novelist and pay his bills. That's not very exciting, though George Gissing, in 'New Grub Street,' drew out of it a squalid and miserable tale which, once begun, had to be finished. Luckily, in 'Cynthia' Mr. Merrick finds a secondary theme, and handles it so delicately and so tenderly that the book has an abiding charm because of it. That theme is the growth of Cynthia's soul.

"I myself am one of Cynthia's victims, and I am sure that Mr. Merrick is another. He sketches her with admirable reticence in the beginning, where she is shown to us as very little more than a pretty girl. His strokes are few and sure. But she grows from chapter to chapter, and at the end, after the tragic crisis, she sweeps onward to the sentimental crisis which crowns the tale of her married life with a dignity and grave beauty which justify a belief in Hestia even now, when modern practice and belief are against such a belief. She justifies Mr. Merrick's conclusion, too. It is seldom enough that we are able to believe in the happy solution of such troubles as he has traced out in 'Cynthia.' Cynics against inclination, we feel that the dog will return again to his vomit after the easy reconciliation and facile tears upon Hestia's generous bosom. Not so here. Cynthia has got her Humphrey for what he is worth and will hold him. She is one of Mr. Merrick's loveliest women; and he has made many lovely women."

Finally, Says Barrie—

Sir James M. Barrie, writing of still another book, "Conrad in Quest of His Youth," declares:

"The novel readers who have gone and died without ever knowing of the sentimental quest of Conrad . . . we may drop a sigh for them, or a 'Serve you right,' according to their opportunities. Incomplete lives! . . . There is no one with a greater art of telling a story, if that art consists in making us forever wonder what we are to find on the next page. There are a hundred surprises in 'Conrad.' Even when you have traveled with him far and know precisely in what circumstances he is next to be placed, shut the book and ask yourself what is to happen and you will find that you don't know in the least; twenty lines from the close you have no idea how the story is to end. . . . When we come to the end we must feel that there was no other, that he has merely discovered the truth."

And in another place he says:

"Disagreeing among themselves on most matters . . . they [Mr. Merrick's fellow writers] are agreed on this, that Mr. Merrick is one of the flowers of their calling.

"Compared to many of his contemporaries he is quite a gay dog, humor shining constantly in his pages and a fine serenity; instead of setting forth to make his characters miserable he is so much in sympathy with them that I can think of no novelist who spends more time—it is almost divertingly obvious—in seeking a happy way out for them.

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"A new novel by Leonard Merrick is to me one of the events of the year."

And now we have reserved a bit of good news for the last. According to Mr. Merrick's publishers, the perplexing puzzle is in process of becoming academic. That is, it begins to want for actuality. In still plainer words, Merrick has become at length a seller—and a good seller. The incomprehensible public begins to warm and, in the words of the publisher himself, "is calling for this collected edition faster than we can supply it."

His Method

I HAVE used the expression "etched," and this expression indicates, in my opinion, the most characteristic feature and the high-water mark of Mr. Merrick's genius.

He does with his pen what a fine etcher does with his needle. Working in a far different medium, he gives us the special qualities of the etched line—its animation, its spontaneousness, its rare economy.

"Every stroke he makes tells strongly against him if it be bad," says Seymour Haden of the etcher, "or proves him to be a master if it be good. In no branch of art does a touch go for so much. The necessity for a rigid selection is therefore constantly present to his mind. If one stroke in the right place tells more for him than ten in the wrong, it would seem to follow that that single stroke is a more learned stroke than the scores of ten by which he would have arrived at his end."

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—ARTHUR W. PINERO

HIS LAST RENDEZVOUS—A French Story

Translated by William L. McPherson

Here is a little story with a clever touch of humor and irony.

THE sun was just rising when Guy de Préfontaine, glancing through the curtains of the car, saw that he had arrived at his destination. The trying night had aggravated his rheumatism. He rubbed his knees before he grasped his two traveling bags and alighted on the station platform. At that moment, nevertheless, the famous author forgot his age and the dignified retirement in which he had planned to spend his remaining years. Youthful and foolish as a man of twenty, he yielded to the intoxication of that heady, expansive, buoyant mood which precedes the keeping of a rendezvous.

He wasn't, however, any longer in the full bloom of his prime. To how many similar rendezvous had he traveled already—he, a celebrity, the author of "The Ashes of Love," "The Southern Lights," "The Sacred Threshold"! All his life he had chanted women and love. All his life he had pursued, from one disillusionment to another, the image of passion. He was now on the decline in years and in glory. People believed less in his star. He had himself decided to seek the solitude of a little house, on the borders of a wood, to write his memoirs.

But Mme. Désaulniers had drawn him out of his retreat.

Guy de Préfontaine arrived at the hotel. After choosing his room and changing his clothes he seated himself by the window from which he could see the austere, tan-colored sierra. Then he opened his bag and looked for a photograph. It showed the face of a woman, with proud and delicate features, and a mouth shaped like a bow. He gazed at it for a long time.

He had received one day a charming letter from Spain. In it a woman told the illustrious author of her admiration for him, in terms so exalted and at the same time so ingenuous—with as much candor as intelligence—that he had answered, bored as he had often been by missives of that character. An intimate correspondence ensued, at first friendly, then gallant and finally amorous.

The unknown's name was Mme. Désaulniers. She lived near Madrid, where her husband was the director of a large factory. She felt somewhat lonely and very much unoccupied. She read a great deal—especially Préfontaine's works. She had seen many of his photographs. But she didn't know that for many years he had allowed none to be published, except those taken in his fortieth year, in which he still looked handsome and vigorous, with his thick hair, his strong features and his imposing mustachios. Moreover, a celebrated author, who writes of love, always seems to his women readers to possess eternal youth.

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So it was that at the solicitation of Mme. Désaulniers, after two years of correspondence, Guy de Préfontaine, ancient pilgrim of love, had set out for Spain. To tell the truth, he feared a little a first meeting with this young woman. Didn't she have a far too fictitious idea of him? But he found some consoling arguments. He had grown old without noticing it. He flattered himself that Mme. Désaulniers wouldn't notice it, either.

The rendezvous was for 4 o'clock. At half-past three he started for the Escurial. It was a beautiful day and still warm, although in the second week of October. The severe palace of Philip II stood before the traveler, in its tragic solitude. At the end of the terrace Préfontaine entered the garden where Mme. Désaulniers was to join him.

He paced slowly up and down the narrow walk bordered by stiffly trimmed box bushes. His spirits were depressed by the shadow of the high walls, yellowish gray, with little windows which make one think of a convent or a gigantic mausoleum. If he turned to the right he saw a reservoir, cold and bare. He began to shiver.

"It is plain that she is young," he reflected. "What a place for a rendezvous!"

In spite of himself he thought of death. That idea, which formerly gave spice to his amorous emotions, now produced a marked uneasiness and a profound discouragement. Notwithstanding, he kept on walking, his heart beating, his hands either icy-cold or burning, as impatient and anxious as in the days of his youth.

Two young girls passed, dark and handsome, but with oily complexions. They looked at Préfontaine. With a smile one of them said to the other:

"Who is that old gentleman?"

"He is a Frenchman," the other answered laughing. "You can see that he is waiting for a woman."

Préfontaine understood Spanish. Those phrases cut him to the heart. An old gentleman! Was that the impression he produced? At Paris people knew him, treated him as a man still young, all accepting and flattering his idiosyncrasy.

It had seemed to him that he had scarcely a wrinkle—scarcely a mark of age.

"I would have done better to stay at home," he said to himself. "It was so sweet—that correspondence, that dream of a mysterious love, that romance never to be realized. Old gentleman!"

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Suddenly he gave a start. Mme. Désaulniers was coming toward him. She was even more beautiful than her photograph. Tall, fine and slender, she resembled Diana, with Diana's cold and haughty face. Préfontaine was so affected that he couldn't speak to her at once. And Mme. Désaulniers passed by him, looked at him with indifference and continued her walk. Not for a second had the idea entered her head that this elderly man, with a plaid on his arm, was he to whom she had given a rendezvous—was he whom she loved!

"She didn't recognize me," said Préfontaine, under his breath. "I am too old."

Tears of despair came to the elderly author's eyes. The young woman walked to the end of the terrace and leaned on the low wall, as if awaiting somebody. She watched the rude and lofty sierra, and, down there in the distance, Madrid sparkling in the sun.

M. de Préfontaine, with bent head, left the promenade. There was nothing to do but go. His hour had struck. Life was no longer anything for him but a blur. He didn't want to witness the shock which Mme. Désaulniers would experience if she recognized him. So far as he was concerned, everything was over.

For the last time Guy de Préfontaine turned around. He saw the young Diana, proud and pensive, her figure detaching itself against the still brightening sky. He filled his eyes with that fugitive vison. Then he fled.

It was his last rendezvous.